

# Raising Resilient Kids

## Building inner strength and character into tomorrow's leaders

By Michael McQueen



The most common concern I hear expressed by parents and teachers when it comes to today's youth may in fact surprise you. It is not the fear that an entire generation is losing the art of relating to others due to the rise of technology. Nor is it the complaint that Gen Y seem incapable of patience or delayed gratification. It isn't even often stated 'fact' that today's young people have little or no respect for authorities and institutions as in days of old. Rather, the most common concern I hear described is that today's children and young adults lack some inherent sense of internal strength, character and resilience that previous generations possessed. In a real sense, many wonder if we have raised a generation of children who are just too *soft*.

Resilience. It is the buzz word of the moment. In education and child development sectors, it is all the rage. We are planning conferences, writing papers and commissioning studies to look at what ever happened to the resilience in young people. Where did it go? Why has it gone? How can we instil it in the generations we raise, teach and lead?

I must admit that resilience is a topic that has captured my attention in recent months. This is partly because there isn't a presentation I deliver where the theme doesn't become a topic of discussion, and partly because I have witnessed a lack of it first-hand in my own interaction with peers, staff and clients.

The feedback is consistent and the stories are in many cases the same: a young person in a position, course, relationship or organisation for whom everything is going along fine. And then something happens. It doesn't need to be much (in fact, it often isn't), and their whole life comes down like a pack of cards. Words are spoken, decisions are made and courses of action taken that seem completely out of the blue and often like an over-reaction. Next thing you know it, they have quit, given up, swapped paths or simply disappeared without a by-your-leave.

If you have experienced a chain of events similar to the one described above, you are not alone. To understand why this younger generation so often seems to lack resilience, it is critical to gain an understanding of the society that has shaped them.

With the first of them born in the early 1980's (a decade which would become known as the Decade of the Child), Gen Y entered an era where parents were almost accusingly asked '*have you hugged your child today?*'. The pressure on parents to raise children with great self-esteem, a high degree of confidence and a keen sense of their rights resulted in a group of children who were just what their parents hoped they would be: articulate, bold and seemingly self-assured. However, the flipside of the parenting agenda of the 1980's was that this generation tended to hear nothing but praise, affirmation and positive reinforcement. Every child was told how special, unique, wonderful and brilliant they were regardless of performance or effort. The result? A largely pampered generation who were, in many cases, sheltered from experiences of hardship, criticism, failure and disappointment.

Added to all this, Gen Y grew up in a pre-GFC era marked by prosperity, low unemployment and ever increasing convenience. Is it any wonder then that when the going gets tough, Gen Y get going... literally. In a very real sense, they have never learned the skills or needed to develop the character to persist despite setback, failure, disappointment or criticism.

So what is resilience? Like most character traits, resilience is best defined by describing how it is applied in real life. Resilient people tend to possess:

- a.) The ability to **stand firm** despite **challenges, setbacks, delays**.

- b.) The ability to be **undeterred by external circumstances** and events and
- c.) The ability to **'rebound'**.

To truly understand why Gen Y tend to lack the above traits, we must first understand their paradigm when it comes to the three foundations of resilience:

### **Foundation 1: Patience**

Gen Y tend to see patience as a frustrating waste of time rather than a virtue necessary for success. Delayed gratification tends not to be part of their psyche and a setback in the achievement of goals tends to be seen by this group as evidence that they are chasing the wrong goal as opposed to evidence they are on the right track. Having grown up with microwave ovens, lightening speed internet and fast food, it is no wonder Gen Y find it hard to wait - it's something they've never really had to do.

### **Foundation 2: Personal responsibility**

Responsibility is a word that tends to have only negative connotations for Gen Y. It is perhaps synonymous with blame-ability. Rather than seeing responsibility in the empowering way many of their parents see it (*response-ability* or the *ability to respond*) many of this group see responsibility as something that should be avoided at all costs. To be fair, Gen Y to this extent are simply a reflection of the increasingly litigious society that has raised them.

When it comes to decision making in life, Gen Y tend to make decisions based on feelings and emotions. This is, of course, a safe way to operate because there is a certain level of responsibility that can be avoided if one responds 'because it felt right at the time' when questioned as to why they did or did not do something.

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### **Foundation 3: Realistic expectations of 'normality'**

The expectation held by many older generations is that life can often be unfair and is in some sense meant to be hard. Setbacks, failures and disappointments are thus a part of normal everyday life and represent little more than character-building hurdles that need to be overcome. For these older groups, normal everyday life is largely mundane - there are high days and low days but most days are just somewhere in between and that's *normal*.

The strange paradox with Generation Y is that for this group, normal has become abnormal. As a generation who have been heavily influenced by television sitcoms and popular media, this group have had a version of life modelled to them that would be, according to older generations, anything but normal. For young people, their expectation is that normal life is full of drama - ecstatic highs and devastating lows. Normal daily life could be exhilarating, tumultuous, exciting, depressing, terrifying... but never, ever boring or dull. If life is boring or dull, 'something must be wrong with me or the goal I am pursuing' this group might say. Many teachers even report the tendency for this group to chase or create drama in life when there isn't any because the extremes of life seem to be the only place where they feel at home and 'normal'.

In light of the influences and trends that have shaped young people and their approach to life, the fundamental question we come back to must be whether it is even possible to build resilience into young people? Can resilience, like any other virtue, be imparted or instilled?

I would suggest the good news is that the answer to this question is a resounding YES! Resilience can be built into today's youth. Often we assume that the only way to do this is by getting young people away from their everyday context and taking them out of their comfort zone. However, while this is certainly a helpful approach, I have also come across some highly effective strategies that don't involve removing young people from the real world so they can learn to better thrive in it. Below are 4 keys to building resilience in young people without necessarily 'going bush'.

## Four keys to building resilience into young people

### 1. Practice intelligent neglect.

This phrase is one I borrowed from a quote by the American political figure Ivy Baker Priest. She says:

*"My father had always said that there are four things a child needs - plenty of love, nourishing food, regular sleep, and lots of soap and water - and after those, what they need most is some intelligent neglect."*

**“Perhaps it is time that we allowed and even encouraged parents to give their children some more space and permission to make mistakes and deal with the consequences.”**

Interestingly, the idea of neglect (intelligent or otherwise) seems light years from the vocabulary and mindset of modern parenting. For at least the last two decades, the whole nature of parenting has centred almost exclusively on the concepts of nurture, protection and support. However, as psychologist Wendy Mogel suggests in her book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* perhaps it is time for the pendulum to swing back to centre.

I have heard many parents express a fear they have bred 'softness' into their children. With all the best intentions of giving their kids 'everything they never had', these parents worry they have robbed their children of the character and self-reliance that life experience brings. The examples of this abound: parents

who pay all their children's bills, insist on chauffeuring them everywhere rather than leaving them to catch public transport and even parents who will immediately, doggedly and even militantly defend their kids when they get in trouble at school.

Perhaps it is time that we allowed and even encouraged parents to give their children some more space and permission to make mistakes and deal with the consequences. Surely the long-term benefits of letting children fight some of their own battles outweighs the short-term peace of mind that comes from fighting their battles for them.

### 2. Use stories to model resilience.

There are many reasons narrative is the best and perhaps the only effective way of really connecting with, inspiring and influencing the behaviours and mindsets of today's youth (see article *Storytelling... the Secret to Impacting and Influencing Generation Y*). Without repeating those here, my simple encouragement would be to use stories and experiences to convey the reasons for and benefits of persisting, enduring and bouncing back from adversity. The more you can share both your positive and negative experiences in life and the wisdom you have gained through these, the more likely it is that Gen Y will take on board the principles you are aiming to convey to them.

### 3. Encourage engagement in community.

Resilience, like any virtue, is not something that can be developed in isolation. Just like the virtues of patience, compassion and forgiveness, resilience is developed and sharpened only through interaction with other people.

If you are a parent, it is vital that you encourage your son or daughter to be involved in causes, groups and institutions which allow them to be in community. These can include any range of sporting, religious and personal interest groups where your child gets the opportunity to be responsible to and for something and someone.

Likewise, schools and colleges will see wonderful results by encouraging students to become actively involved in community-based and community-focussed initiatives. In recent years I have been particularly impressed with the concept of 'service learning' championed by Father Chris Riley in his charity Youth Off The Streets. Fr Chris describes that the value of service learning is that it gives young people a sense of empowerment and ownership and this is indeed the beginning of character formation.

#### 4. Adopt the role of coach.

Consistently it has become clear in my own work with young people that the emotion that immediately precedes disillusionment and resignation is the sensation of being overwhelmed. As such, parents and teachers can play a vital role in coaching young people through challenges & difficult times. An effective coach will always be a source of 3 things:

a.) **Optimism:** Often misunderstood as merely positive thinking, optimism focuses on a bright and hopeful tomorrow rather than living in denial about the challenges and frustrations of today. Capturing perfectly the spirit of optimism, William Booth is famously quoted as encouraging his missionary daughters to "focus not on the waves but on the tide" as they faced opposition and difficulty in the early days of establishing The Salvation Army in North America. This is true optimism – it is about getting a sense of perspective that allows us to focus on the long term vision rather than the momentary setback.

b.) **Objectivity:** Sometimes what young people need most is someone objective to guide them through the process of endurance. By breaking down challenges, difficulties and seemingly insurmountable tasks into bit-sized achievable tasks and goals, parents and teachers can help young people see a way forward when everything feels like it is just too hard.

c.) **Affirmation:** Although excessive use of positive affirmation is partly to blame for the negative trends we see in young people, it is ironically part of the solution as well. The key is to focus on performance, output and effort. Make a habit of 'catching' young people making positive choices and then recognise these in tangible, practical and sometimes public ways and you will encourage them to repeat the very things you hope to see more of.



While Gen Y may exhibit a well-crafted exterior that seems 'tough', it is important to realise that resilience has little to do with toughness and far more to do with strength. Where toughness is about the external, strength is about the internal. Where toughness is about appearances and coping mechanisms, strength is about values, principles and identity. With so much focus on preparing young people with the skills they will need in their adult lives, let's not forget to prepare and equip them with the character, values and strength they will truly need to flourish.



Michael McQueen is a leading authority and sought-after presenter on the topic of understanding & engaging Generation Y.

To purchase a copy of Michael's bestselling book, *The 'New' Rules of Engagement* or to find out more, visit

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